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Ψυχρότης ἢ τὸ Ψυχρόν

BY LARUE VAN HOOK

In this paper I wish to consider the meaning and history of an interesting metaphorical technical term of Greek rhetoric and literary criticism, namely, *ψυχρότης* or its equivalent *τὸ ψυχρόν* (Latin, *frigus* and *frigidum*).

Ψυχρότης is a comprehensive term referring to a certain vice, or rather to certain vices, of style (all too prevalent from Gorgias, perhaps the earliest great offender, to the present day), vices which received serious consideration from the literary critics and rhetoricians. "Frigidity," the literal and obvious English equivalent, is the most convenient rendering, although it needs explanation and qualification. "Fustian" translates the term more exactly.

The earliest formal treatment of *ψυχρότης*, which is also the *locus classicus* for its discussion, is to be found in the *Rhetoric*¹ of Aristotle, where τὰ ψυχρά, or frigidities in language or style, are said to arise from four causes, (1) compound words (*ἐν τοῖς διπλοῖς ὀνόμασιν*); (2) the use of obscure, foreign, or obsolete words (*τὸ χρῆσθαι γλώτταις*); (3) epithets, long, *mal-apropos*, or too numerous (*ἐν τοῖς ἐπιθέτοις, μακροῖς, ἢ ἀκαίροις ἢ πνευνοῖς*); (4) metaphors (*ἐν ταῖς μεταφοραῖς*), i.e., metaphors which are inappropriate (*ἀπρεπεῖς*) because they are ludicrous (*διὰ τὸ γελοῖον*), or too high-sounding and pompous (*διὰ τὸ σεμνὸν ἄγαν καὶ τραγικόν*), or obscure because far-fetched (*ἄσαφεῖς δέ, ἂν πόρρωθεν*).

To make his meaning clear Aristotle gives examples of these *ψυχρά* quoted from the sophist-rhetoricians, Lycophron, Gorgias, and Alcidas, some of which we shall briefly consider.

1. Frigidities in compound words are exemplified by Lycophron's τὸν πολυπρόσωπον οὐρανὸν τῆς μεγαλοκροῦφου γῆς, "*many-faced heaven of the mountain-topped earth*," and ἀκτὴν στενοπόρον, "*narrow-passaged shore*"; by Gorgias' πτωχόμουσος κόλαξ, "*beggar-witted flatterer*," and Alcidas' πυρίχρων, "*flame-colored*," of the countenance, and κυανόχρων, "*the dark-blue-colored bottom of the sea*." All these, says

¹ iii. 3.

Aristotle, are poetical in their nature because of the doubling, and, as he later affirms, "such compounds are serviceable for the composers of *dithyrambs*."

2. As examples of frigid γλῶτται Aristotle cites the following: Lycophron calls Xerxes a πέλωρον ἄνδρα (πέλωρος, "huge, mammoth," frequent in Homer, was obsolete in Aristotle's time), and Sciron a σίννις ("destroyer") ἀνὴρ. Objection is also made to Alcidas' use of the words ἄθυρμα, "toy," and τεθηγμένον, "whetted," (of ὀργή), both poetical words.

3. Frigid epithets in prose are λευκόν, "white," of γάλα; ὑγρόν of ἰδρώτα, "moist sweat." It is reprehensible of Alcidas to speak of εἰς τὴν τῶν Ἰσθμίων πανήγυριν, "to the assembled concourse of the Isthmian Games," instead of simply εἰς Ἰσθμία; to refer to τοὺς τῶν πόλεων βασιλεῖς νόμους "the laws, the potentates of cities," for τοὺς νόμους, and he does not say simply, κλάδοις, "with branches," but τοῖς τῆς ὕλης κλάδοις, "with the branches of the forest," etc.

4. The fourth cause of frigidity is to be found in inappropriate metaphors. Two examples are taken from Gorgias, χλωρὰ καὶ ἔναιμα τὰ πράγματα, "things or events green and full of blood," and σὺ δὲ ταῦτα αἰσχρῶς μὲν ἔσπειρας κακῶς δὲ ἐθέρισας, "these things thou hast sown in disgrace and reaped in misery." We should agree with Aristotle that the first metaphor cited is overbold, but the graphic and admirable figure of sowing and reaping is of course common in all prose literature.¹

Two supposedly frigid metaphors taken from Alcidas are as follows: τὴν φιλοσοφίαν ἐπιτείχισμα τῶν νόμων philosophy, "a fortress against the laws," and τὴν Ὀδύσειαν καλὸν ἀνθρωπίνου βίου κάτοπτρον, the Odyssey, "a fair mirror of human life."

Cope² affirms that Aristotle's objection to these last metaphors seems to show a change of taste from ancient to modern criticism. To a certain extent this is true. But Aristotle is objecting, not to the occasional use of such figures, but to the *constant* employment in *prose* of a diction and style appropriate to poetry. For such writers as Alcidas, says Aristotle, use poetical diction, οὐ γὰρ ἡδύσματι ἀλλ' ὥς ἐδέσματι, "not as sweets, but as meats."³

¹ Plato, *Phaedr.* 260 C; Cic. *De orat.* ii. 65. 26; New Test. ² Ed. Arist. *Rhet.* iii. 46.

³ It is amusing to see how in this comment Aristotle himself has employed ἀντιθέσεις, παρονομασία, and ὁμοιοτέλευτον in a manner which Gorgias might well envy.

In brief, then, according to Aristotle, frigidity in prose is caused by the use of poetical diction and the employment of extravagantly figurative language. As we shall see, Aristotle's treatment of τὰ ψυχρά forms the basis for subsequent discussions of the topic, but his definition, and the application thereof, is considerably enlarged by later writers.

In the treatise *On the Sublime*,¹ extant under the name of Longinus, we find a discussion of frigidity wherein τὸ ψυχρόν is said to be due to the craze for novelty, to the straining for the unusual, to the use of hyperboles, and to the employment of variations. τὸ ψυχρόν is caused by puerility (τὸ μεираκιῶδες), the tawdry (τὸ ῥωπικόν), and the affected (τὸ κακόζηλον). Tumidity (τὸ οἰδοῦν) goes beyond the limits of the sublime, but puerility is the direct opposite to elevation; it ends in frigidity. Writers slip into these vices while striving for the uncommon (τοῦ περιττοῦ), the elaborate (πεποιημένου), and especially for the charming (ἡδέος), but they run aground on the tawdry and the affected. Of this frigidity Timaeus² is often guilty; e.g., Timaeus describes Alexander the Great as the man who gained the whole of Asia in fewer years than it took Isocrates to write his *Panegyric* urging war upon the Persians. So also Plato (according to Longinus), usually divine in style, when he meant simply δέλτους, "tablets," said κυπαριττίνας μνήμας, "cypress memorials."³ Another objectionable figure from Plato is cited: "As regards walls Megillus, I should agree with Sparta that they should be permitted to lie asleep in the earth and not summoned to arise."⁴

The general principles laid down by Longinus are to be commended; the examples which he chooses, however, are entirely unobjectionable. It must be confessed that in all the ancient critics and rhetoricians we find a bitter intolerance of many figurative expressions which are quite inoffensive according to our taste, and, in fact, often commendable. It is doubtless the novelty rather than

¹ Chaps. iii and iv.

² Sicilian historian, flor. 310 B.C. Another example of Timaeus' frigidity is cited by ancient writers (see Mayor, *Clas. Rev.*, XXIV). The burning of Artemis' temple at Ephesus on the day of the birth of Alexander is accounted for by the fact that the goddess was absent in Macedonia officiating in her capacity as Ilithyia at the *accouchement* of a new divinity. The frigidity of this conceit, says Plutarch (*Alex.* iii. 3) was enough to extinguish the conflagration!

³ *Legg.* v. 741 C.

⁴ *Ibid.*, vi. 778 D.

the audacity of these figures which arouses distrust and provokes censure from the critics, who are prone to prescribe the limits of τὸ πρέπον with an academic narrowness which is sometimes painful. Would not much of Plato's poetical prose and many of Demosthenes' vivid periods be reduced almost to the commonplace if they were actually revised according to the drastic rules of the critics?

The extent to which Longinus is indebted to Caecilius¹ is impossible to determine, but it is certain that in this treatment of ψυχρότης he is following that writer. In the beginning of chap. iv Longinus says that Timaeus furnishes many examples of τὸ ψυχρόν, but adds rather naïvely that he will give one or two only, since Caecilius has anticipated him in quoting the greater number!

Let us consider next the treatise *On Style* (περὶ ἐρμηνείας) attributed to Demetrius,² wherein are to be found many references to τὸ ψυχρόν with illustrative comment. According to Demetrius frigidity is largely due to exaggeration, to hyperbole, to distortion, and to the pompous or bombastic (ὑπέρογκον). The chief types of style have their corresponding or kindred vices. Frigidity is that which is neighbor to the elevated (τὸ γειννιῶν τῷ μεγαλοπρεπεῖ). Demetrius here gives us Theophrastus' definition of frigidity: τὸ ψυχρόν ἐστὶ τὸ ὑπερβάλλον τὴν οἰκείαν ἀπαγγελίαν, "frigidity is that which transcends the expression appropriate to the thought." This perhaps is the best, the most simple, and yet the most comprehensive definition to be found. A line from the *Triptolemus* of Sophocles is quoted as an illustration: ἀπυνδάκωτος οὐ τραπεζοῦται κύλιξ, "chalice unbased is not intabulated."³ Here the meaning is: a cup without a bottom is not placed on the table. The subject is petty and does not admit of such grandiloquence.⁴ Frigidity, according to Demetrius, may be in the thought itself; e.g., a writer (unknown) thus describes the hurling of the rock by the Cyclops at Odysseus' ship: "While the rock was traveling through the air, goats were grazing upon it"! Frigidity in a manner is analogous to imposture (ἡ ἀλαζονεία). An

¹ Cf. Caecilius Calac., ed. Ofenloch, p. 66.

² Cf. Roberts' ed. Demetrius, *On Style*, Index.

³ Tr. by Roberts; so also the definition of Theophrastus.

⁴ Roberts (*op. cit.*, p. 232) quotes as a burlesque on this style, *Rejected Addresses*, where Dr. Johnson's ghost is made to describe a door with a knocker and bell as a "ligneous barricado, decorated with frappant and tintinnabulant appendages."

elevated style on a trivial subject is reprehensible unless intended as a jest. The appropriate must always be observed: τὰ μὲν μικρὰ μικρῶς, τὰ μεγάλα δὲ μεγάλως.¹ Hyperbole² is the most dangerous of all figures because it suggests the impossible. There are three kinds: (1) of likeness, e.g., like to the winds in speed; (2) superiority, e.g., whiter than snow; (3) impossibility, e.g., her head struck the heaven. It is a proof of the genius of the divine Sappho that she can use the dangerous figure, hyperbole, successfully, e.g., more golden than gold, χρυσῶ χρυσότερα.³ Just why more golden than gold is an admirable figure while whiter than snow⁴ is an impossible and objectionable hyperbole, Demetrius does not explain. Doubtless the magic name of Sappho has something to do with it.

Demetrius has still more advice to give on our subject. Antitheses and parallelisms should be avoided, for they cause the style often to be frigid. The same evil also results from the constant introduction of metrical phrases in prose; likewise from the use of prose in poetry. And yet that composition is frigid which lacks good rhythm or all rhythm: e.g., ἤκων ἡμῶν εἰς τὴν χώραν, πάσης ἡμῶν ὀρθῆς οὔσης,⁵ "to this land of ours I now come, finding all of it aroused." This is not prose rhythm, says our critic, owing to the succession of long syllables.⁶

In § 6 Demetrius gives an illuminating illustration of a kind of frigidity. He quotes with admiration Xenophon's description of the river Teleboas: οὗτος δὲ ἦν μέγας μὲν οὐ, καλὸς δέ,⁷ "it was not large; lovely it was, though." Thus the short *colon* is appropriate to the subject. A frigid writer would have rendered the thought thus: οὗτος δὲ μεγέθει μὲν ἦν ἐλάττων τῶν πολλῶν, κάλλει δὲ ὑπερεβάλλετο πάντας, "this river was, to be sure, smaller than many others, but in beauty it surpassed all."⁸

¹ One is reminded of Aeschylus' defense of his *θῦκος*, *Ar. Ran.* 1058 ff.

² § 124.

³ *Frag.* 123, Bergk.

⁴ *Il.* x. 436.

⁵ *Ser. Inc.*

⁶ Roberts (p. 233) quotes Pope, *Essay on Crit.*, "And ten low words oft creep in one dull line."

⁷ *Anab.* iv. 4, 3.

⁸ In § 121 Demetrius quotes this same example from Xenophon and cites a writer (unknown) who described a small stream as ἀπὸ τῶν Λαυρικῶν ὀρέων ὀρμώμενος ἐκδιδοῖ ἐς θάλασσαν, "rushing forth from the mountains of Laurium it debouched into the sea." Such a description, says Demetrius, would be appropriate to the Cataracts of the Nile or the mouth of the Danube!

Of all the ancient writers Demetrius treats most completely of τὸ ψυχρόν. He has made a careful study of the subject, as he regards this vice of style as particularly important. Although his discussion is based on Aristotle and Theophrastus, for he quotes from the former's chapter on τὰ ψυχρά¹ and gives us the excellent definition of the latter,² yet he handles the subject with considerable independence.

In the detailed textbook on Rhetoric of Hermogenes it is surprising not to find a chapter devoted to frigidity. However, the chapter "On Affectation"³ (περὶ κακοζήλου⁴) really defines also τὸ ψυχρόν, for it treats of the faults of style arising from excessive use of figures, from exaggeration, and the employment of the impossible, the incredible, the unnatural, etc. Extravagant figures are condemned by Hermogenes,⁵ as they make style harsh, heavy, and almost mean. Demosthenes is not guilty of this fault, but there are many examples in the wooden sophists (παρὰ τοῖς ὑποξήλοις σοφισταῖς). For they are guilty of very many frigidities (ψυχρεύονται), e.g. they speak of vultures as living tombs, etc.⁶

In Greek Comedy we find numerous references to stylistic frigidity. It will be recalled that Euripides and Theognis are the two great sinners according to Aristophanes. Thus in the *Thesmophoriazusae* (848) we find "He [Euripides] is not ashamed of his *frigid* play, Palamedes."

But the most scathing obloquy falls to the lot of the poetaster Theognis, who was nicknamed χιών, "Snow," thanks to his habitual frigidity, an example of which is cited by Aristotle.⁷ It is likewise in the *Thesmophor.* (170) that we find the explanatory line: ὁ δ' αὖ Θεόγνις ψυχρὸς ὦν ψυχρῶς ποιεῖ, "since Theognis is frigid, frigidly he writes." The unkindest cut, however, is to be found in the *Acharnians* (138). Synchronously with the production of a tragedy by

¹ § 116.

² § 114.

³ περὶ εὐρ. Spengel *Rh. Gr.*, II, 256.

⁴ Demet., § 186, thus distinguishes between τὸ ψυχρόν and τὸ κακόζηλον; the former arises from the elevated, the latter from the smooth (γλαφυρός), style.

⁵ περὶ ἰδ. α, Spengel, *Rh. Gr.*, II, 292.

⁶ Cf. also Longinus, chap. iii, for this same stock example quoted from Gorgias.

⁷ *Rhet.* iii. 11. Theognis designates a bow as a φόρμυξ ἄχορδος; quoted also by Demet. § 85.

Theognis at Athens deep snow covered all Thrace and the rivers were solidly frozen.¹

Theognis did not enjoy a monopoly in the production of frigid fustian. Alexis² speaks of a well of water actually *ψυχρότερον Ἀραρότος*. Araros was his rival, it may be superfluous to add. Machon³ reports a delightful gibe at the expense of Diphilus. It appears that the following conversation took place on the occasion of a call by that comic poet on the charming lady Gnathaena:

Quoth Diphilus: Upon my word,
Gnathaena's wine is cold as snow.
Why, yes, Gnathaena says, we poured
Your dramas in, to make it so.

But *ψυχρότης* is not peculiar to dramatists. In a fragment of Theophilus⁴ we find this repartee: "What say you to a crab [*κάραβος*]"? "That's frigid; I don't like orators." Carabus was an orator.

Lucian⁵ accuses the grammarians Zenodotus and Aristarchus of much *ψυχρολογία* when he is assured by Homer in person that all the verses suspected by those scholars are genuine. That is, those Homeric critics were guilty of ineptitude which was equivalent to lack of veracity. And so Hesychius gives *ψυχρολογία* as equivalent to *ψευδολογία*, but Photius in the *Bibliotheca*⁶ uses *ψυχρολογία* in the sense of *ψυχρότης*: the Sophist Choricus because of his extravagant predilection for figurative language *εἰς ψυχρολογίαν ἐκπίπτει*.

The last Greek writer, so far as I have been able to ascertain, who discusses frigidity is a certain Joseph Pinaros Rhakendytes, in his *Σύνοψις ῥητορικῆς*, in a chapter entitled *περὶ ψυχρολογίας*,⁷ in which discussion the examples given, rather than the causes cited, are of interest. According to this Byzantine rhetorician, frigidity

¹ Cf. Lucian, *Hist. Conscr.* chap. xix, who, commenting on certain contemptible historians, says: *τοσαύτη ψυχρότης ἐνῆν ὑπὲρ τῇν Κασπίαν χιόνα καὶ τὸν κρύσταλλον τὸν Κελτικόν*.

² Kock, II, 364; cf. also Eupolis (Kock, 244): *σκῶμμα . . . σφόδρα ψυχρόν*.

³ *Athen.* xiii. chap. 43, tr. by Rogers; cf. Martial iii. 25, who ascribes to the frigidity of a rhetorician the chilling of a hot bath. It will be recalled that Catullus (xlv) caught an abominable cough (*mala tussis*) from listening to a speech by Sestius. Cf. also Hor. *Sat.* ii. 5. 41 of Furius.

⁴ Kock, II, 474.

⁶ *Cod.* 160.

⁵ *True History*, 117.

⁷ Walz, *Rh. Gr.*, III, 540.

is a vice or fault of discourse (πλημμέλεια λόγου) which generally results from one of four causes:

First, from overdaring figurative language; e.g., "the wild-beast of affliction buries in my heart the tips of his claws and the points of his teeth." It would be better, says Joseph, to express the thought by a simile or comparison, i.e., "Affliction, like a wild-beast," etc. Thus the objectionable harshness of the figure is softened.

Secondly, frigidity results when in a serious discussion one descends to the ridiculous to excite laughter; e.g., if one, speaking of fruits which were not indigenous but imported, should call them *captives* (αἰχμάλωτοι), and that figs growing *senile* in their basket-prisons became *wrinkled*, and that the *pancratiast-pears*, crowded in their baskets, inflicted wounds upon one another.

Thirdly, frigidity is caused by the employment of a trivial style and from the comparison of the noble with the commonplace; e.g., as if one were to compare the king who worthily bestows on each of the deserving the appropriate honor with the clever cobbler who can fit a shoe to any foot. The reverse is likewise true and is to be avoided, i.e., the comparison of the petty with the great; e.g., to call a man or private citizen a sun, or to designate the starry heaven as a sown field or a robe spangled with gold.

But the worst form of frigidity according to the pious Joseph—and now we meet a new definition and application of the term—is the profanation of sacred writings, as by comparisons of sacred personages of Scripture with contemporaries; e.g., Moses with the Patriarch. Further, it is incongruously and boorishly frigid to drag foreign and Greek stories into ecclesiastical literature on sacred subjects. Such references are appropriate only in *encomia* on mundane rulers. Theologus is a conspicuous sinner, for in speaking of Jesus and the miracles he introduced Greek references by way of negation and insolence.

What is the origin of this metaphorical term? Cope says that the origin appears in Quintilian (ii. 4. 29) *fastidium movere velut frigidi et repositi cibi*,¹ words and phrases like stale food that have lost all their savor and become cold and insipid. Now this comparison of Quintilian is excellent, but it is of very limited application.

¹ Introd. to Arist. *Rhet.*, p. 287.

It is not intended to refer to all kinds of stylistic frigidity, but to the effect of the use of certain *trite* words and phrases only.¹ The true answer to the question as to the origin of the term is to be found in Aristophanes, who first uses the word metaphorically as applying both to compositions and to writers. The listener or reader who is keyed up in warm anticipation of the pleasure and the profit which are to result from an admirable literary production is chilled by disappointment; his interest is cooled by the forced, inartistic, exaggerated, or inappropriate style of the speaker or writer. Ennui and disgust ensue, which affect the victim in a manner comparable with the chagrin of Dicaeopolis in the *Acharnians*, who, all agape in eager anticipation of seeing a play of Aeschylus, is chilled to the heart by the fatal announcement of the herald: "Theognis, bring in your chorus!"

It has been seen then, that the Greek critics are generally agreed that τὸ ψυχρόν is the result of excess or extravagance, τὸ ὑπερβάλλον, as Theophrastus states. It is due to literary faults of commission and not of omission. The Latin *frigidum*, on the other hand, seems in general to refer rather to negative sins and to correspond more closely to the English term *frigid*, i.e., tamelessness, flatness, dullness, insipidity of style. It characterizes deficiency in fire or spirit.² Thus it is that, generally speaking, "frigidity" translates *frigidum* but "fustian" best renders τὸ ψυχρόν.

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¹ Cf. Dem. c. *Mid.*, p. 551, 13: ξωλα καὶ ψυχρά, "stale and cold," of ancient crimes.

² Cf. Cic. *Brutus*, 48. 178; 67. 236; *Orator*, 26. 89. *De orat.* 64. 260; 63. 256; *Ad Quint. frat.* iii. 3. 3; Tac. *Dial.* 39. 22.